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## Even renamed, Exxon Valdez can't outlive stain on its past

Polluter: More than a decade of flawless service by the tanker can't erase the stain left by the huge Alaska oil spill in 1989.

By Robert Little  
 Sun Staff

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The story of the oil tanker SeaRiver Mediterranean ends, it seems, in the same inglorious cliché that besets most ships in the U.S. merchant marine. Too expensive to sail on, it was pulled from service late last month and anchored off some forgotten coastline in the Far East, perhaps to die.

But the SeaRiver Mediterranean is more than just another doomed American ship, it is perhaps the most infamous commercial vessel ever to fly the nation's flag - or any flag.

It was, at least, in 1989, when it was still named the Exxon Valdez.

After 12 unremarkable years hauling oil between ports in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, the ship that once spilled 10.8 million gallons of North Slope crude onto the Alaskan coast was mothballed last month and prepared for retirement.

Emptied of cargo, fuel, supplies and anything flammable or perishable, it is anchored off a foreign port that its owners won't divulge, in a state of deep "lay-up" awaiting its fate.

The changing economy and a lifetime ban from the Alaskan oil trade have finally overwhelmed the notorious vessel, and it is a multibillion-dollar headache that its owners are no longer willing to bear.

"She's really had kind of a benign existence since the spill, just sailing in foreign trades without really doing anything too noteworthy," said John Straley, a former crew member and now vice president of the Exxon Seamen's Union, whose members work on ExxonMobil's vessels.

"I'm sure that's just the way the company wants it, too," Straley said. "I think they would prefer that everybody forget about the Exxon Valdez."

Forgettable was never envisioned when the Exxon Valdez emerged

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from the National Steel and Shipbuilding Co. shipyard in 1986.

With modern diesel propulsion and accommodations that were the envy of a generation of seafarers, it became the 987-foot flagship of the Exxon fleet.

The ship was designed for only one route: hauling crude oil from the terminus of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline at Valdez south to Panama and occasionally the U.S. West Coast.

The final hours aboard its bridge before the tanker ran aground might well be the most studied and debated period of seamanship in the history of buoyancy, with claims of alcohol use, sleep deprivation, criminal incompetence and general idiocy all getting a full venting.

But this much is not in dispute: The Exxon Valdez left the shipping channels in Prince William Sound to avoid ice, never turned back and at 12:04 a.m. March 24, 1989 - Good Friday - its flat bottom ground slowly and powerfully onto a rocky bulge called Bligh Reef.

Capt. Joseph Hazelwood, who had turned control over to his third mate, returned to the bridge and hailed the Coast Guard with a now famous message. "We've fetched up hard aground," he said. "We're leaking some oil, and we're going to be here for a while."

To maintain stability and minimize the potential damage of a collision, supertankers such as the Exxon Valdez don't carry oil in one giant compartment, but rather in connected tanks running the length of the ship. The grounding was so severe, however, that it ripped open eight of the ship's 11 tanks, in a line stretching from the forepeak nearly to the superstructure, 600 feet aft.

Three other Exxon ships arrived to pump out the remaining oil, recovering 42 million gallons. The rest - 10.8 million gallons - was lost in the waters of Prince William Sound.

As large as it was, the spill does not rank among the top 50 by most estimates. The largest spill is generally thought to be Saddam Hussein's deliberate dumping of Kuwaiti crude into the Persian Gulf in 1991. Estimates of that spill run as high as 400 million gallons, but the precise quantity has never been determined.

The largest supertanker spill was probably the grounding of the Amoco Cadiz in 1978 off the coast of France, spilling 68.7 million gallons.

But in terms of the damage caused to the coastline, the wildlife, local fishing industries and the reputation of a major U.S. energy company, the grounding of the Exxon Valdez is without rival.

"That ship is an obvious icon for the environmental movement, and was really the trigger for a lot of progressive thinking about the environment and corporate responsibility," said Kert Davies, research

director for Greenpeace USA. "We'd like to see that ship off the waters because we'd like to see any old ship retired, but the issues are much larger now than just the Exxon Valdez."

The ship was floated off the reef, and temporary repairs were made. Then, under its own power and ringed by tugboats, it limped down the Pacific Coast toward the San Diego shipyard where it was built.

Divers noticed that sheets of steel had peeled back from its bottom, creating a navigational hazard that had to be removed before it could enter the yard. While the ship was still at sea, Coast Guard and news helicopters noticed the ship trailing a slick - investigators weren't sure whether it was oil or algae - prompting enough protests that heightened shipyard security was ordered.

During more than a year in the shipyard, roughly a third of the vessel's hull was replaced, along with 3,000 tons of internal steel. The repairs cost almost \$30 million for a ship that had cost \$130 million to build four years before.

The Valdez was renamed Exxon Mediterranean before it left the yard, then dubbed SeaRiver Mediterranean in 1993, when Exxon spun off its vessel operations to a subsidiary, SeaRiver Maritime Inc.

From leaving the shipyard in 1990 until its lay-up last month, the ship made about 190 voyages around the world, and controversy always seemed to find it. Even before it left the yard, floating protesters tried to form a ring by its bow, and others handcuffed themselves together atop its rudder.

Every few years, as the ship sailed among foreign ports, another newspaper or TV station would "discover" the ship's past and a protest would materialize.

When the vessel arrived in Scotland in 1999, The Independent, a London daily newspaper, wrote that "it emerged last night [that] the 1,000 foot-long ship once sailed under a different name, the most notorious in environmental history."

When the vessel approached Australia last year, the Melbourne Herald Sun announced: "Deadly spill tanker coming."

Hollywood gave the ship - a rendering of it, anyway - a supporting role on the 1995 flop Waterworld. The bad guy, played by Dennis Hopper, lived aboard the Exxon Valdez with a gang of seafaring thugs, hailing a picture of Hazelwood as "St. Joe."

Greenpeace has been among the most conspicuous critics, its members occasionally trying to repaint "Exxon Valdez" on the hull. A group of Greenpeace activists floated alongside the ship in Freeport, Bahamas, in 1994 and painted on it the message "Stop me B4 I spill again."

None of the ship's enemies did more damage to the vessel than Congress, which banned the ship from returning to Prince William Sound. "If I had my way, it would never come back," Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens said at the time, according to the Anchorage Daily News. "There is no lesson learned from a second kick of a mule."

The Alaskan oil trades are restricted to U.S. vessels, and most maritime officials suspect that SeaRiver Maritime kept the Mediterranean in the U.S. fleet only in hopes of someday returning it to the lucrative trade for which it was designed.

In foreign trade, the ship was a cumbersome and expensive anomaly, and is widely thought to have lost money each year.

Exxon, which paid \$2 billion to clean up the Exxon Valdez spill and has spent most of the past 12 years litigating as much as \$5 billion in potential penalties, sued to have the ban overturned. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is considering the suit, and SeaRiver officials say they might bring the ship back into service if the court rules in their favor.

The SeaRiver Mediterranean is a good ship by most objective measures. Large and fairly modern, well maintained and equipped, it could sail for seven more years before being forced to retire by a federal law for which it is responsible.

"We recognize the tragedy and don't mean in any way to minimize the significance of it," said Ray J. Botto, a spokesman for SeaRiver Maritime. "But in the 12 years that followed, the vessel has had an absolutely exemplary record of service."

The only sign of trouble in the Mediterranean's long record of Coast Guard inspections is an entry deep in the paperwork, early in the ship's life, that reads: "Vessel entered San Diego for repairs, after suffering a major grounding in Prince William Sound."

An identical sister ship, the SeaRiver Long Beach, continues to sail in and out of Prince William Sound, to little fanfare.

Even its foibles go largely unnoticed. In 2000, the Long Beach was ordered into an emergency dry dock when Coast Guard inspectors noticed it trailing a sheen as it left the port of Valdez. Inspectors later found fractures in its hull.

But the SeaRiver Mediterranean has never lived down its past, and the men and women who kept it in business the last decade say they wish it had.

"My first two years on the Med were the best I ever spent at sea," said Leo DeCastro, a former crew member who met his wife aboard the ship in the mid-1990s. "We'd go to a different port each stop, and people would say, 'Oh, that's the ex-Exxon Valdez.' It was a great ship, with kind of a novelty to it."


"There's no denying the accident and how awful it was, but they're punishing the ship, even while they let worse ships into Alaska. ... I think it's sad, really. Because it's not the ship's fault."

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